

Religion and National Development: The Nigerian Experience

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Social life is impossible without the shared values and moral beliefs which religion provides. In its absence, there would be no social order, social control, social solidarity and cooperation. Therefore, the sacredness of religion strengthens values and moral beliefs which form the nucleus of social life. The objective of this paper is to identify the place of religion in the development of the nation. A finding shows that religion as a basic institution of unity in the society has been bastardized. In fact there are cases of social unrest leading to the destruction of lives and property because of religious divide. The greater power which religion provides to direct human actions has been negatively applied in the society. This ill behaviour arises from ignorance, provocation, inherent prejudice and intolerance. At the national level, it is caused by manipulation by elites, government and non-adherence to secularism. The researchers recommends that religion can still serve as an instrument for promoting social solidarity and national development if those leaders and politicians who mastermind religious conflicts are fished out and punished.

Keywords: Religion and National Development.

INTRODUCTION

Religion is a powerful universal phenomenon that has permeated Countries of the world. It has to do with the belief in a supernatural being that is invisible. Religion creates great impact in human behavior and in most cases transforms primitive and hostile behavior to a refine and more acceptable attitudes compatible with human cohabitation. It was through the influence of religion that Nigerians stopped killing twins and banishing their mothers to evil forest; to start appreciating twin children. Religion moderates our greed, hostility and animosity of killing human being as a punishment for a minute offence. Religion makes us to appreciate

our creature and seek for ways of moderating our action in order for us to have a peaceful co-existence, and seek for salvation. This change of behavior can impact positively on national development in Nigeria. It is the effort of and activities of man that enhances or retard national development.

In Nigeria, the two major religions are Christianity and Islam; both have wielded enormous influence on their adherents. Based on the endemic ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria Ubani (2003) posits that the irony of the nation's politics today is that religion, supposedly a source of happiness and social upliftment for mankind, has taken the lead as a foremost contributing factor to hatred, war, terrorism and religious combat which are inimical to national development. In some cases, religious leaders

encourage their members to adopt violent approaches to enforce their religious beliefs.

THE CONCEPT OF RELIGION

Durkheim (1965) in his functional perspective sees religion as a unified system of beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a church, ultimate non-material fact and has a "dynamogenic" quality. That is, it has the capacity not only to dominate individuals but also to elevate them above their ordinary abilities and capacities. He argues that social life is impossible without the share values and moral beliefs which form the collective conscience. Also, in their absence, there would be no social; order, social control, social solidarity or co-operation. Therefore, the sacredness of religion strengthens values and moral beliefs which form the basis of social life.

Bouquet (2002) conceives religion as a fixed relationship between the human and non-human entities, the sacred, the supernatural, the self-existent, the absolute or simply, God. However, religion is such a wonderful universal phenomenon that is found in every society, developed or underdeveloped, black or white race. Pratt (1986) agrees that religion is a social behaviour associated with individuals or communities directed towards the power or forces which they conceived as having lasting and ultimate control over their religion, men exchange obedience and loyalty with security and peace in form of a covenant with the supernatural powers, hence they turn to worship them culminating in a religious exercise.

According to Eliade (2000), religion is the most substantial bond of humanity, the fear of the unexplainable phenomena of the universe and some superstitious beliefs compel men to enter into a bond or pact with such unknown forces. Balm (1964) sees religion as the experiences of the holy. This is where the objective side of religion comes to play. The objective of worship is conceived by man to be holy; having convinced himself thus, man the 'experience' of such encounter expresses and passes onto others that which he has internalized. It is easy, therefore to experience the 'holy' than to know or localize it.

Balm explains that religion is the most inclusive ethics. This calls to question "what is ethics". Ethics slightly is synonymous with morality, though the latter is wider in scope.

Marx (1981), a well-known enemy of religion due to certain circumstances springing from injustice, oppressive and exploitative tendencies of capitalism noted that "religion is the opium of the people". In effect, he likens religion to a sleeping tablet or analgesic applied to soften pains and forget sorrows momentarily. It is also equated with some contemporary narcotics which young adults addict themselves to help them feel gay and be in a state of illusion, happiness or achieve some feats.

Serrate and Hawkini (1992) share common views with Karl Marx when they assert that religion makes one to forget one's earthly hardship because, for the religionist the other world is where one would lay his treasures. Also, there is no retaliation because "vengeance is mine" says the Lord. Marx was materialistically inclined, so to him the need of this immediate world is more urgent than the imaginary pie in the sky.

However, Davis (1983) suggests that if religion is practiced honestly, it can open to the realities of life and not cause a blind folding as some of the economic determinists seem to argue. Religion, according to Dopamu (2005), is a factor of civilization and the knowledge and its seed everywhere have been known to contain such potent elements. Durkheim (1963) relates religion to its role in society through individual members who believe. Thus, becomes a factor of cohesion order, peace and solidarity in the society. The researcher is of the view that religion is both God-word and Man-word oriented. It involves God and man relationship for the purpose of communion and communication in peace and security ensured on the part of man, a sort of pact resulting in some ritual observances.

Harry (2006) observes that religion in its essence gives meaning to life and serves as an instrument for promoting social solidarity, value consensus, harmony, and tolerance in the society. Also, it strengthens the unity of a group or country and much of the norms of the social system are integrated by religious beliefs.

In spite of the integrative nature of religion in contemporary times, religious differences have become a permanent feature of Nigerian state. In fact, the greater power which it provides to direct human action has been negatively applied in Nigerian society. That is, it is becoming too difficult to check its excesses in the country. Like the Marxian narcotic opium, majority of the nation's political class in the local communities and beyond,

unemployed youths, traditional rulers social groups, clubs, religious fanatics and their agents can be regarded as being intoxicated with religion thereby creating conflict in the society.

NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Lawal Oluwatoyin (2011) describe national development as the overall development or a collective socio-economic, political as well as religious advancement of a country or nation. However, in this paper, national development will refer to the ability of a country or countries to improve the social welfare of the people, by providing social amenities like quality education, potable water, transportation, infrastructure, medical care etc.

THE NATURE OF RELIGIOUS PRACTICES IN NIGERIA

Section 10 of Nigerian constitution states that “the government of the federation or of a state should not adopt any religion as state religion”. In addition, section 38(1) states that “every person shall be entitled to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including freedom to change his religious or being and freedom (either alone or in community with others, and in public or in private) to manifest and propagate his religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice and observance.

Nigeria is a secular state. People have freedom to choose any religious and propagate his beliefs publicly. The most prominent religious worship in Nigeria are: Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion (ATR). All religion preaches peace, harmony, tolerance and love for one another. Nigerians are adherent of Christianity, Islam or African Traditional Religious. There are noticeable spreads of churches and mosques but a decline in the spread of shrines. In the Christendom, the Pentecostal revolution has manifested in flamboyant religious life style that have characterized peoples way of life and evident in the proliferation of churches and religious activities such as revivals, deliverance, crusades, fund raising, pilgrimages, festivals and observance of religious holiday. The Islamic faith is bedeviled by the wave of extremism, which has done a great harm to the Islamic faith. The jihadists have politicized

and militarize the Islamic faith to a point of creating disaffection in the society. This can be explained through the Boko Haram Mayhem in Nigeria. Their activities hamper national unity, integration and development in the Nigeria state. Religion should be targeted as agent of socialization, mobilization, thereby building a society of love and peace.

In his words Maman (1990) states that, “the situation in our country Nigeria....came as a stark reminder that dialogue between people of different faith is needed not because it is interesting or a theoretical luxury but because, if it is not attempted, the historical consequence could be irredeemable”.

RELIGION AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Parrinder (1976) and Idowu (1980) are of the view that in Nigeria; very little efforts have been made to tap the potentials of religion as cement for unity and the development of nationhood. Yet, religion is being manipulated to cause ethnic divisiveness and civil strife. Some people exploit it for their selfish political ambition. Religion is one vital element that can be harnessed for fostering solidarity and unity.

Mutuah et al., (2000) avers that being life itself, religion can serve as the basis on which a nation can be solidly founded. It can also be used as an instrument of bringing into reality our dreams of a united Nigeria.

According to Clark (1984), religion can be used to make way for the understanding of the world in which we live. It can supply answers to such questions as the existence of God, the sufferings and pains of humans, the problems of after death and so on. It could provide moral values by which a nation may stand. Such moral values include what is virtue and vice, thereby enriching the people's morals, the welfare of the individuals and society at large.

Denton (2006) suggests that religion may inspire people to develop great ideas as courage, love, endurance and sense of kinship. Yinger (1990) avers that national development requires that all hand must be on deck to build a strong and united nation which could be anchored on religious and intellectual capabilities of every citizen.

Awolalu (2000) succeeded in clarifying that religion can be a part in national development by promoting high moral standards such as honesty, courage, hard work, obedience and respect for leaders. He suggests that religion could be

expected to encourage faith, trust, and confidence in both God and fellow human beings which makes for integration, cohesion and solidarity by bringing people together for worship, festivals, ceremonies, and prayers especially people of different ethnic, cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

Forde (2002) argues that religion solves the problems of selfishness which hinders the pace of progress in nation building. Idowu (1992) suggests that religion can effectively provide an understanding of certain occurrences that affect man and his environment, especially some of the trials and tribulations being experienced by Nigerians such as anxiety about the structural adjustment programme (SAP). The continued drift of the nation may be attributed to our sins, but for people who are deeply religious, it can be argued that through the power of prayers backed by God-led ministers these national problems could be successfully resolved to the glory of God.

According to Tim (1996) there is the beliefs that "if God cares for the things of nature and environment, such as the birds of the air, the fishes of the sea and the animals in the forest, God will definitely cater for the needs of the country which he has created". Meyer (1996) describes religion as being capable of promoting national and moral identity, to inculcate in the individuals the right attitude which would eradicate crime, murder, suicide, rape, corruption, indolence, dishonesty and cheating which has bedeviled the nation. He further stated that when individuals imbibe these attitudes, it will be demonstrated in their families, social groups and other works of life.

Using Religion to Enhance National Development in Nigeria

Leke, a corp member serving in Adamawa state, suggests the "Satan is enthroned to guide and guard." He believed that some politicians and prominent figures in the larger society are responsible for the hydro headed problems of religious divide. He prescribed devotion to God as a panacea, "We need the fear of God in our hearts to turn the nation around" he asserts.

Harry (2006) proffers that religious leaders of the principal religions in Nigeria (Muslims and Christians) can do more by closely monitoring their members and inculcating in them the right values of unity and tolerance for nation building. He argues that the leaders and politicians who allegedly

master-mind these conflicts should stop paying lip service to the problem and call themselves to order to checkmate religious crisis in the country.

Ayo (2001) regrets that religion which is capable of inculcating the spirit of national consciousness, patriotism and sense of oneness has now become a theatre of blood bath sacrificing innocent lives on the barren altar of religious divide. Pathetic enough, the scourge has spread to secondary and primary schools. Christians and Muslims youths alike have been cut down at the prime of their lives and we all shudder each time religious conflict strikes. What is important is not only to stamp out this religious divide, but we should also look at the structure of the society that generates these religious conflicts.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study has x-rayed the place of religion in Nigeria's national development. It must be noted that religion cannot be rejected in its totality because of how much it has permeated into our knowledge system. More so, the world is gradually growing into a global village within which all kinds of cross-cultural activities are taking place.

Religion can be used as a tool or means of promoting national development. Though religious conflict are master minded by greedy and corrupt politician and religious leaders. The structures of the society guarantees religious conflict, and can be used too to strengthen inter-religions cum denominational cooperation; which will promote national development. Religion has a direct impact on the individual, the individual are the once who steer the ship of development, due to their ability to peacefully co-exist and use their creativity to better themselves and their environment. It is equally the individual that is used to ferment religious conflict. Religion preaches the virtues of peace, love, understanding and goodness. If the individual is highly religious, his moral upbringing will impact positivity on national development.

However, it is an urgent task for us to raise our religious norms such that it contributes positively to national development. This must be reflected at homes, in governance and in school curricula at all levels. Indeed the opportunity to correct the basic error of our religious beliefs is upon us; this is because it will restore to us our inward beauty, identity, and pride. It therefore behooves us to choose where to belong so that we can proceed in

putting measures in place to attack any hindrance to national development which we hope to achieve. Government should carry out deliberate effort to promote inter-religious and denominational co-operation, meetings, conferences and universal worship, by creating a platform that will handle such responsibilities. The platform will action the followings:

- To periodically host inter-religious/denominational worship.
- Promote high moral standards such as honesty, hard work, obedience and respect to elders and leaders.
- It should be used to build faith, trust and confidence in both God and fellow human beings.
- Build solidarity, integration and cohesion among the people irrespective of one's religious denomination.
- Preach against vices, crime, corruption, indolence, dishonesty and cheating.
- Promote value re-orientation of the people through this platform, Churches, Mosques, National Orientation Agency, Schools and etc. to depart from existing socio-economic vices, impatience, corruption, electoral violence, that is crippling our polity.

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